

# The US Air Force Academy's Cutting-Edge Character Development Program

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*with*  
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**I**NTEGRITY FIRST, service before self, and excellence in all we do—in sum, doing what is right and doing so for the right reason—are lofty aspirations that represent our Air Force core values. In essence, our core values represent the fundamental building blocks of personal character. While few, if any, Air Force members would argue against the worth of these values, many might suggest that internalizing such guiding principles is not something that can be taught or trained. The question remains, however, whether values can be successfully developed in college-aged men and women.

Because the leaders at the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) believe that character can be taught and developed, they established the academy's Center for Character Development. The academy's philosophy concerning character



development holds that cadets continue to develop all their traits (academic, athletic, military, and character) during their four years at USAFA. The academy's cadet development policy emphasizes that cadets develop best (1) when they are in an environment of trust and respect; (2) when outcomes are specified; (3) when they are challenged beyond their current abilities, yet supported in their quest to extend those abilities; (4) when they realize everyone around them (fellow cadets and the academy staff) is also developing; and (5) when they learn to develop themselves and take responsibility for that development.

The academy defines character as "the sum of those qualities of moral excellence that stimulates a person to do the right thing, which is manifested through right and proper actions despite internal or external pressures to the contrary." The challenge for the academy was to determine which behaviors consistent with a person of character also embody the core values espoused by the Air Force. A team of officers—specialists in human development—researched this question and arrived at eight specific "character outcomes" based on measurable, definable behaviors. The outcomes reflect the team's efforts to articulate the academy's expectations of its officer graduates. The team concluded that the outcomes reflect the academy's ideals—what it hopes cadets and members of the academy community strive to do and to be. Additionally, the outcomes elaborate the core values of the institution. They serve as the basis for evaluation of USAFA's effectiveness in its quest for excellence. Furthermore, they provide criteria for personal assessment, as well as a means to evaluate the programs and activities indigenous to the academy. The outcomes are as follows:

1. *Officers with forthright integrity who voluntarily decide the right thing to do and do it.* Such officers do the right thing in both their professional and personal lives. They do not choose the right thing by calculating what is most advantageous to themselves but by having a consistent and spontaneous inclination to do the right thing. Not only are they prompted to do what is right, they actually do it.

2. *Officers who are selfless in service to their country, the Air Force, and their subordinates.* Selfless officers know how to prioritize their loyalties so that their loyalty—in descending order—is to the moral principles reflected in the Constitution, the profession of arms, the mission, and individuals. People who serve selflessly resist the natural tendency to focus exclusively on self-serving desires; thus, they do not take advantage of situations for personal pleasure, gain, or safety at the expense of the unit or mission. They share in the dangers, hardships, and discomforts of subordinates. They commit themselves to duty and responsibility to others rather than to claims of personal privilege or advantage.

3. *Officers who are committed to excellence in the performance of their personal and professional responsibilities.* Such officers strive to do their best in everything they are capable of accomplishing. They measure their self-esteem and sense of accomplishment not by comparing their works with those of other people, but by noting their achievements, based on a realistic assessment of what they are capable of accomplishing.

4. *Officers who respect the dignity of all human beings.* Officers who respect human dignity believe in the value of individual differences of race, gender, ethnicity, and religion. Officers who respect and value other people support and encourage them to develop to their fullest potential; they do not demean or debase other people. They also accept the value that individual differences add to an organization, and they contribute to an environment in which all people can fully utilize their skills and abilities.

5. *Officers who are decisive, even when they face high risk.* Decisive officers make timely and resolute decisions. They do not let self-serving desires prevent them from making decisions that are necessary for mission accomplishment. They are not afraid to communicate their beliefs about the best way to achieve mission accomplishment to their superiors. However, decisive officers are not disloyal when their advice and recommendations are not adopted.

6. *Officers who take full responsibility for their decisions.* These officers voluntarily give full

and honest accounts of their actions and decisions to people who are entitled to know about them. When loyalty requires them to take actions that are unpopular with their subordinates, they neither blame their superiors nor shirk responsibility for the decision.

7. *Officers with the self-discipline, stamina, and courage to do their duty well under even the most extreme and prolonged conditions of national defense.* Officers with these traits do what is right, whether the consequences involve personal peril or potential harm to their careers. Officers with a strong sense of duty also embrace the mental toughness and discipline vested in our oath of obligation "to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic." They understand that fulfillment of that oath may require great personal sacrifices. Officers who do their duty accept that their profession may require self-discipline, stamina, and courage to attain the highest level of competence.

8. *Officers who understand the importance of spiritual values and beliefs to their own character development and that of the community.* Officers with this understanding are clear in their own convictions and respect the convictions of others. They understand that their leadership role requires sensitive awareness of the importance of religion in people's lives and know that they need to accommodate and support individuals' freedom to exercise faith.

To accomplish these outcomes, USAFA organized the Center for Character Development into three distinct divisions: Character and Ethics, Human Relations, and Honor/ Honor Education. The Character and Ethics Division is primarily responsible for educating cadets, faculty, and staff on how to deal appropriately with moral issues. Additionally, the division implements training programs designed to increase cadet awareness of and growth toward the institution's eight character development outcomes. These programs include experiential training activities (high- and low-ropes course initiatives), character development seminars, community service projects, guided focus sessions, and cadet/staff training.

The Human Relations Division develops and executes programs intended to emphasize the importance of valuing individual differences. Diversity management training, equal opportunity, and facilitator training are primary areas targeted by the division. During their four years at USAFA, cadets receive a total of 39 lessons covering sexual harassment, discrimination, cultural awareness, and interpersonal communications.

The Honor Division deals with both honor education and administration of USAFA's honor code system. The division creates training programs to engage cadets in honor and ethics issues in order to help them internalize relevant concepts. The division is also responsible for handling honor violations, as well as the honor probation/counseling program. During their four years at the academy, cadets receive 43 lessons covering the honor code as it applies to USAFA, officership, the Air Force, and service to the country.

Using the eight character development outcomes as criteria for internalizing core values, the academy's Center for Character Development began crafting programs to educate and challenge cadets to grapple with issues involving character. From the moment new cadets ("basics") arrive at USAFA, they are required to contemplate situations that test their commitment to core values. During their basic training, incoming cadets receive 12 "character reflections" led by cadets in charge of training. These scenarios contain actual case studies of cadets and junior officers who had to choose between self-centered actions and those consistent with Air Force core values. The basics then engage in dialogue concerning the decisions made, the consequences of those decisions, and the sometimes difficult task of choosing to do what is right.

Each semester, the center hosts character development seminars that address one of the eight outcomes. The seminars are designed to expose cadets to a sizable number of military and civilian professionals who have personal experience with the topic. Additionally, the center sponsors an annual character development and leadership symposium based on one outcome. These symposia are for all cadets and attract many academy

staff and local community attendees. Guest speakers and panels from around the country share their unique perspectives and personal experiences. Speakers such as Secretary of the Air Force Sheila E. Widnall and Gen Ronald R. Fogelman, Air Force chief of staff, provide keynote addresses to all cadets.

The center also offers a number of mandatory character training and education events for cadets. Each year, cadets receive approximately 35 hours of honor education discussions and 25 hours of training in human relations and equal opportunity and treatment. Additionally, all sophomores receive a number of character discussions as part of Military Arts and Science 220—Foundations of the Military Profession, a required academic course. All juniors take a required course, Philosophy 310—Ethics—in which they discuss major moral theorists and their application to military issues. In addition, cadets take numerous courses in management, behavioral science, law, and so forth, requiring discussion of character issues.

To provide a more comprehensive, academy-wide environment for character development, USAFA also instituted a Character Development Commission. Chaired by the dean, the commission includes senior officers from all mission elements of the academy: Chaplains, Athletics, Preparatory School, Admissions, Center for Character Development, and so forth. It meets monthly and provides a cross flow of information and visible support for each agency to emphasize and actively engage in activities that further the character development of cadets.

Focusing exclusively on programs to increase cadet awareness of character development, however, is an incomplete approach. The center also provides skill training in leadership and character development for all faculty and staff members. The training consists primarily of case studies, lectures, role playing, and experiential exercises to further illustrate concepts presented in the classroom. The training seeks to enable faculty and staff members to engage cadets in moral dialogue when such a need arises.

The center recently added a cutting-edge, adventure-based learning program to its list of of-

ferings when it constructed a high-ropes challenge course, used to reinforce the more didactic character training methodologies previously described. A 50-foot climbing tower and climbing wall serve as the centerpiece of the program. On this course, cadets and staff/faculty groups alike experience the need for courage, decisiveness, support, teamwork, interpersonal communications, and respect in a risky environment. Research has shown that adventure-based methodologies tend to have greater lasting effects than classroom training alone.

With several character development initiatives in place, the final step for the center was to create an assessment program to determine the effectiveness of its efforts. The center's assessment experts determined that a multifaceted approach was necessary. This entailed constructing an environment audit survey to determine if programs (academic, military training, flight training, athletic, etc.) were creating an environment conducive to character development. Further, the center developed numerous survey instruments for implementation at regular intervals throughout a cadet's four years at the academy. These surveys include preadmission character assessments and program critiques as well as honor and social climate surveys. Such instruments are useful in measuring the degree to which cadets have internalized Air Force core values as well as the academy's character development outcomes. Lastly, the center designed a comprehensive personal character inventory to evaluate cadets' assimilation of the eight outcomes adopted by the institution. The center's attitude about survey development is that instruments must complement one another to facilitate accurate evaluations of a cadet's progress (or lack thereof) in internalizing the outcomes.

Although the character development program at USAFA is relatively new, preliminary feedback is encouraging. Instilling a desire within cadets to live professional and personal lives that adhere to the tenets found in Air Force core values is challenging. The fact that both the Air Force and the academy have invested considerable effort and resources in building a character devel-



opment program speaks to the critical nature of the expected outcome: “air and space leaders of character who can be trusted to do what is in the best interests of our nation.”

### Contributors

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